

By

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**This review is from: What Cinema Is! (Blackwell Manifestos) (Paperback)**

In serious dialogue with digital animation, the moving attractions of the early days, the belabored styles of the silent period and the impact of sound, Andrew's What Cinema Is! reads with the suspenseful momentum of a psychological thriller or a mystery tale. And indeed Bazin's famous question What is Cinema? and his open-ended notion of realism has remained an unsolved mystery until today.

Inspired by the end of World War Two, photo-journalism, the aesthetics of the ellipsis and of the sketch, Bazin is "the" foundational figure for the academic study of film. Andrew re-evaluates Bazin's film theory in the light of Benjamin's and Barthes' ideas on mechanical reproduction and signification in general. Thanks to a succinct and accessible prose, the author demonstrates that Bazin's cinema is a recording filter based on a highly personal, but never all-controlling or all-knowing vision. The director's labor of sifting, however, must also be a receptive, accepting approach, because it is simultaneously in touch with the opaque nature of reality and the most intuitive, if not visionary, side of human perception.

At some point, Andrew seems to tempt his readers into thinking that cinema is a sort of sixth sense, or special antenna meant to faithfully register and preserve what is human, so that humankind may look at itself from the outside, from afar in a spatial and temporal sense, and through an indifferent, leveling eye made of glass. Of course, this non-human gaze authorized by a film-maker is neither stable nor definitive, but purposefully open-ended and subject to constant revisions and, most importantly, misinterpretations. Yet this is precisely why cinema transforms itself into an endless activity of oral re-story-telling in the family, among friends, and in the class-room, as we share, discover, and feel, over and over again, what cinema is for each one of us and among us. Paradoxically, cinema is the medium of tragic optimism that evaluates the human condition in the world, but does not give up on the image of life in motion as such.

In his famous 1945 essay, The Ontology of the Photographic Image," Bazin compares the cinema to the Egyptian mummy and to the contested Turin shroud allegedly enveloping, and, therefore, carrying on its surface the imprint of Christ's tortured features. Highly controversial for his use of either esoteric or

features highly controversial for the use of either aesthetic or religious metaphors in regard to the photographic and the film image, Bazin envisions the cinema as a form of heuristic embrace or mnemonic nurturing aimed objectively at the description of all human behaviors ranging from its most abominable to its most generous manifestations.

Although Andrew refers to Christian theology and Byzantine art history, his arguments are so strong that they easily address a secular, if not agnostic, perspective as well. A left-wing Catholic, who saw in the cinema and the cine-club, a source of healing and, most importantly, dialogue after Hiroshima and the Holocaust, Bazin was denigrated as an idealist and conservative critic throughout the seventies and the eighties, during the heyday of post-structuralism. Famous for having founded in 1951 the seminal magazine *Cahiers du Cinema*, Bazin is also the officially recognized mentor of the French Nouvelle Vague, with its own rebellious children Truffaut and Godard.

It is well known among specialists that, since its development as an academic field, film studies has been characterized by an oppositional paradigm. On one side stands Eisenstein's dialectical and constructivist, materialist yet anthropocentric montage adopted by the left-wing agenda of post-structuralism and, on the other side, is Bazin's supposedly submissive, if not regressive Catholicism interested in the most marginal genres of little films about animals and children. In short, until now, the French thinker has been dismissed as a film critic unable to compete with the more robust theorists, such as Eisenstein, Vertov, Kracauer, Arnheim, Metz, Bellour, Manovich, Cubitt, Bolter and recent others.

Andrew's recent book *What Cinema Is!* sets the score right, and once for all, by attending to the complexities and insights of Bazin's fully-fleshed out theoretical position. For instance, Andrew explains why cinema is not at all an art like the previous ones, while, at the same time, he details Bazin's steady interest in cinema's dialogue with other arts, philosophy, and sociology.

Chapter after chapter with sections on projection, editing, subject matter and with examples from classic as well recent films from all over the world, it becomes clear that Bazin's realist legacy easily overrides the digital pseudo-revolution or divide in film-making. This is the case especially now that more and more filmmakers are making personal, low-budget, and profound films, thus bearing witness to the fact that the cinema thrives much more on an existential attitude or moral relationship with the world than on plain and simple technological innovations, academic fashions, and institutional politics.

By comparing the development of cinema to a person's process of psychological maturation, Andrew does not simply define the cinema as such, but he also seems to comment on where cinema is today. and whv we need aoina to the movies more than ever.

since our epoch is marked by division, isolation and conflict. For the cinema according to Bazin--Andrew explains--is one of the ways in which people can be in touch with themselves in a very private and intimate way, while sharing the same space of personal reflection with a mass of fellow humans. Indeed, in the age of the lap-top, we still need, more than ever, the old-fashioned movie-theater, because only there with our minds and bodies simultaneously present, we can be alone and with everybody else at the same time.

In clear contrast with sheepish kinds of mass rituals and the ever-shifting fads of postmodernism, at its best, Bazin's cinema should be an experience of self-introspection and mutually respectful conversations across thinking and feeling individuals. In the end, it becomes clear that Bazin's legacy is forever modern and up-to-date, simply because it is not predicated on medium specificity alone in the technological sense. Rather Bazin's original question What is Cinema? must remain an open question. What cinema is--Andrew argues--amounts to its vocation to suggest the invisible core of beings and things, while their elusive and contradictory manifestations are meant to trigger a moral interrogation about public history and lived experience.

Andrew's book opens up a new era of study and growth for film studies whose future has been wrongly associated with fashionable sentences about the imminent death of cinema. With the cinema more alive than ever through film festivals, restorations, and archives, and with the cinema powerfully situated in the heart of the liberal arts curriculum and on the threshold of neighboring disciplines, film texts will emerge more and more strongly as indispensable and vital education.

For Bazin and Andrew alike, cinema is the living document and historical interpretation of our blind journey in time and space. For each film is, after all, solidly grounded in its moment, although ephemerally linked to the way we grope in the darkness of a waking dream we call "life," even though this very thing called life is most often a film-like fantasy of self-confidence and progress with the most uncertain of outcomes. And cinema, Andrew says, is our little searchlight into the night of human existence.